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AUTHOR Lukens, Rebecca
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ABSTRACT

The study of children's literature, of the prose and poetry that compels children to become and to remain readers, properly belongs in the college English department. The importance of accepting children's literature as a legitimate course in the humanities may be seen in the following three reasons: teachers with a background in, and critical appreciation of, all literature will be much better able to instill in children a love of good books; the alternatives--teachers exposed to children's literature in schools of library science or of education--are less desirable and not as likely to focus on literary excellence; and children nurtured by good literature will be much more likely to study the humanities when they get to college. (JM)

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Rebecca Lukens
English Dept. Miami Uni
Oxford. OH 45056

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Why Children's Literature Belongs in the English Department

All of us assembled here are committed to the printed word, to words that follow each other in lines from left to right, stimulating thought, communicating meaning, and awakening emotion. Somewhere, some time, we all realized that to us literature had impact, some kind of power. Because of this commitment, all of us have spent years with literature. If some of us lacked a missionary sense about teaching, a mystical calling, we at least knew that we wanted literature to be a major part of our lives. We knew we wanted to read, read, read; we feared there wasn't time to read everything, and that we might miss the best book of all. To us, literature is very important.

How did this happen to us? My guess is that at some time in our childhoods someone read to us, someone who believed that good stories affect readers, or at the least, that they give pleasure. This someone did more than provide a warm body and a protective arm; this person had a library card, had some judgment about what was a waste of time to read aloud, had some lower boredom level beyond which he or she would not descend, had some standards about what was worth a single experimental reading, what was worth renewing, and

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what must be bought so that it would be forever available.

For some of us this adult who made us eventually into card-carrying library users who chose reading over television, hopscotch or baseball--perhaps even over pub-crawling later on--this adult was a parent. Educated or uneducated did not matter. What did matter was a willingness to make and share discoveries through good books. But for many of us, this adult was a teacher who read to us, and encouraged us to find good books, who knew what was right for each of us. This teacher read, read, read--aloud--to the class. She knew there was more to school than memorizing facts or learning words for words sake, more to reading than literacy. This teacher was as important to our discovery of literature as the parent who read aloud.

Here, then, is the first reason why children's literature belongs in the English department: The teacher who loves good books instills in her pupils a love of good books. Our children and grandchildren need teachers who have had college courses in children's literature, yes, but a course taught by someone committed to literature. These instructors should be as committed to teaching children's literature as they are to teaching Pope or Milton, Melville or Faulkner. Perhaps even more committed, for the instructor of children's literature meets students who will influence the lives of countless

children--your own among them. This instructor will help them to understand their fellow human beings and to be able to impart humane values to society.

In my own English department, I hear such statements from my colleagues as "I don't know anything about children's literature. I just know I read a lot as a child." Or "I get my children's books from the Marboro sale sheet; they have real bargains." These colleagues reveal several things: First, they have not traced the origin of their own love of reading. Secondly they are unaware that they do not represent the norm; even when they were in school all children did not read a lot. But thirdly, and most importantly, they do not see that literary excellence is literary excellence, whether for child or adult. Secure perhaps in the knowledge that their own children are reading voraciously, they may forget that by recommendations or by choices of what they themselves could bear to read aloud they have developed in their children both skill and taste.

But haven't we a responsibility to our own children in the classroom, too? And a responsibility to other people's children?

Francelia Butler of the University of Connecticut has reminded us that the humanities and social sciences are rapidly discovering childhood and its literature. Historians, sociologists, philosophers, and art historians have noticed and traced in children's literature the attitudes of historical periods toward childhood and toward adult values. Psychologists may

vary in their approaches, but they too are interested. Most notable recently is Bruno Bettleheim in his book The Uses of Enchantment about the beneficial effect of folk tales upon human development. While academics from these disciplines are aware of children's literature, English departments seem to leave children to their own devices.

And yet, the business of English departments is literature and the criticism of literature. As we must believe or we would not stay in the business, "The conscientious critic may contribute as much to the literature of a country as the conscientious writer."[1] In the process of leaving children's literature alone, we neglect a serious responsibility to our society. We are the first to condemn the best-seller school of criticism. To us, "people like it, it must be good" is anathema. And yet, by refusing to take a critical stand on literature for children, we are subscribing to best-sellerism. Even more condescendingly, we may say, "The kiddies will never know it's junk." But children will know; they will respond. They are responding now: they respond by never reading an unassigned book during their school days. And they will never again open a book for pleasure reading after school--thank God--is over and done.

Generations have extolled the virtues of and argued the necessity for criticism. Without good criticism, we would have

weaker writing, and weaker reading as well. As Henry Seidel Canby, editor of the old Saturday Review of Literature said, "Unless there is somewhere an intelligent critical attitude against which a writer can measure himself. . . one of the chief requirements of good literature is wanting. . . the author degenerates."[2] When we consider that such fine minds as Lewis Carroll, J.R.R.Tolkein, and C.S.Lewis, as Mark Twain and E.B.White have considered writing for children worthy, it seems strange that we as critics should regard criticism of their works and others beneath us. When the National Book Award (as well as the Lewis Carroll, the Newbery, the Andersen, the Wilder, the Carnegie and others) is given annually for the outstanding children's book, it seems short-sighted of us to find children's literature beneath our notice. Criticism is our responsibility. Children's literature is part of the whole body of literature that we are duty bound to examine.

A second reason that children's literature belongs in the English department is that the alternatives are less desirable. Two other departments are likely. In large universities, library schools can muster enough enrollment, and in smaller ones, schools or departments of education take over.

In the past, librarians have usually been products of liberal arts programs. Attracted to library work because of

their love of books, at home in libraries where they had spent pleasant and profitable hours, they chose books for their careers. At present this is less clearly the case. Students who choose educational media, EDM as library science for schools as sometimes labeled, are often there for quite different reasons. School EDM centers are warehouses and dispensing stations for records, films, filmstrips, videotapes, and posters--as well as books. From my experience, I find present EDM students far less interested in reading than library science students of the past. Many of them show little background; the assigned touchstones are unfamiliar, and their outside reading for critical evaluation is a totally new experience. Many EDM students are ready to stack, shelve, and store, to check in and out, to publicize the library in a thoroughly successful manner. Sad to say, with increased pressure for each elementary school to have its own library, there seems to be diminishing possibility that the libraries will be staffed by book lovers. We all remember Marshall McLuhan's scary message: communication by pictures will make the written word obsolete.

But as long as EDM students take their children's literature courses in English departments, where professors believe that a poor story will never make a reader out of anyone, and that a good story makes eager readers, all will be well. If EDM students are taught that a good story depends for its

holding power upon solid characterization, suspenseful conflict with action and inevitability, on significant but undidactic themes, on lively and imaginative style that makes unexpected comparisons and stretches a reader's sensory awareness--as long as students are taught by English department types who value literary excellence in any piece of writing, our library systems for both the public and the schools will be stocked with good books chosen by people who know and care. Your children--and all children--will profit.

The second alternative to the English department as site for children's literature is the shcool of education. Let me cite a recent interdisciplinary experience. I was invited to participate in the annual spring conference in children's literature in our school of education. Three hundred elementary school teachers from southern Ohio came to be told by the invited speaker from 1000 miles away that the greatest poem for children ever written was "Little Orphant Annie's Come to Our House to Stay." This author of a popular language arts text used what he called the dramatic approach; he chose a dozen teachers from the audience to stand in a line across the front of the lecture hall, each holding a placard with a phrase written in six inch letters: Neigh-neigh, choo-choo, bang-bang, and whistle. Then he read "Sioux City Sue." Whenever he read the word "train," that teacher raised aloft the choo-choo card, and 300 adults yelled in unison "choo-choo." The word sheriff called for bang-bang, and

Sioux City Sue herself drew a whistle. Then, a new story. While the speaker read the Caldecott Award winner, that psychologically sensitive book Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak, four adults held hands to form a boat for Max the protagonist; the adults sailed stumblingly across the stage. Others, monsters, "Growled their terrible growls, and showed their terrible claws, and gnashed their terrible teeth." Finally, a six foot teacher, little Max, lay down to sleep across three of the front seats in the auditorium--his bed. During this dramatization, the melody of Sendak's prose cadences and the sincerity of his themes never surfaced. What I saw as the message of the speaker was that the words of literature have no significance. That the themes of literature are not worth the time spent on them. Literature must be jazzed up to be sold to its audience.

This, and I realize it may not be universally the case, is what can happen to children's literature. The function of education departments is to train teachers; the function of English departments is to consider literature. They are concerned with methods; we are concerned with content.

The content of children's literature involves the whole student. Quarter after quarter, semester after semester, I am surprised to find elementary teachers-in-preparation making their first forays into the fine literature of Potter and Alexander,

Cooper and Sendak--literature that they missed as children. The delight the instructor finds in these classes comes from our students' delight. Much student pleasure comes, of course, from the books; another part, and a healthy part, comes from the better students' obvious pleasure in the experience of a content course. Many of these students are involved in their first vicarious adventures through literature; they are pleased to discover the sources of their excitement.

There is a third reason why children's literature belongs in the English department. For years children have been reading, and we have assumed that they would always read. Now we find that once children learn to read, they may never read again. They quit. I contend that children do not read because so often the stories or poems offered them in childhood are poor literature, dull and uninteresting, obvious, preaching or teaching in purpose, limiting children by sex role stereotyping, by narrow vocabularies, and by required reading levels. We have left literature, reading for pleasure, in the hands of literacy specialists, not literature devotees.

And here comes the third reason. It is, admittedly, self-serving. If there are no children coming along with interest in the humanities, what will happen to English departments? To our jobs? And, more importantly, to the world? A hard-nosed, selfish point, but perhaps only self-preservation

can jog English department elitists into offering children's literature. To be selfish, we need bodies, head count, FTE'S, majors. But--we are humanists, furthermore. We believe that ideas influence human beings, and societies. As we see students turning away from the humanities into the factual technologies, the practical social sciences, and the high-salaried natural and physical sciences, it behooves us to change our minds, to accept children's literature as a legitimate course in the humanities.

T.S.Eliot mentions three "permanent reasons for reading: the acquisition of wisdom, the enjoyment of art, and the pleasure of entertainment."[3] Such reasons for reading can best be fostered in English departments. We may influence the future for--in its broadest sense--a truly educated and humane world.

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1 Ivan Southall, quoted in Children and Literature: Views and Reviews, "Criticism and Reviewing," Virginia Haviland, ed.,Scott, Foresman and Co., 1973, p. 391.

2 Henry Seidel Canby, Definitions: A Second Series, Kennikat Press, Inc., 1967, p. 218.

3. T.S.Eliot in Notes Toward a Definition of Culture.